
Citation:

Stevenson, J (2010) Student employability and enterprise: a widening participation perspective. *Assessment, Teaching & Learning Journal*, 8. pp. 24-27. ISSN 1756-8781

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Student employability and enterprise: a widening participation perspective

Jacqueline Stevenson

The profile of the UK HE student population is almost unrecognisable today compared with that of two decades ago, having changed from an élite system to one of mass higher education. Recognising the unevenness of participation in HE across different social groups, over the last decade in particular New Labour has engaged heavily in widening participation (WP) initiatives, underpinned by a belief that widespread higher learning is fundamental to the development of a 'knowledge economy' and to the future prosperity, economic growth and competitive advantage of the UK (DfES, 2003a, p.24). This heavy engagement in WP has resulted in highly diverse HE student bodies: at Leeds Met, for example, our latest data show that 94% of our young, full-time, first degree entrants are from state schools, 32% from National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) classes 4–7 (the lowest socio-economic groups) and 13% from low participation neighbourhoods, while 15% are mature full-time students with no previous experience of HE and 15% are young part-time students (HESA, 2009).

The drive to increase participation as a "national economic imperative" (DfES, 2003b) has progressed alongside policy designed to ensure that HEIs are developing the appropriate knowledge and employability 'skills' needed to meet the needs of employers (DfES, 2003b), that is:

"A set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the community and the economy."
(Yorke, 2004, p. 7)

Across the HE sector universities are actively engaged in a range of initiatives designed to enhance student employability, including the ability to reflect on those transferable skills that meet the needs of employers, the ability to set goals and reflect on learning and personal development and to take personal responsibility for this, and the ability to plan towards a future career (Moon, 2004). These initiatives have primarily focused on the curriculum (Yorke and Knight, 2006), with the development of progress files and personal development planning helping students to plan for their educational and career development (LTSN, 2002). Students are also being heavily encouraged to further develop their employability through experience gained in a work-based (Little, 2006) or volunteering (Volunteering England, 2008) context, or through participation in work-related projects.

In addition, universities are increasingly recognising the importance of developing not just employability but also enterprise and entrepreneurship within the curriculum, or what might be termed "a special form of employability" (Moreland, 2006): "the process of uncovering and developing an opportunity to create value through innovation" (NCE, 2003), a definition that places an emphasis on identifying opportunities for innovation and change, developing the skills, abilities and aptitudes necessary for success; and being committed to taking up opportunities (Moreland, 2006). These skills and abilities are viewed as critical in enhancing UK economic productivity through the development of new businesses, including single-handed businesses, since sole trader status, involving a single entrepreneur, is numerically the dominant type of business organisation in the UK (Moreland, 2006). In other words, for many graduates their future will not involve employment within an organisation but the setting up of their own businesses or using their entrepreneurial skills, enhanced within an HE setting, to set themselves up as sole traders.

To support this, Leeds Met students are now able to access a wide and diverse range of activities, initiatives and opportunities designed to enhance their future employment and develop their employability, entrepreneurial and enterprising skills. These include the provision of employability resources for use in the curriculum such as action planning, CV writing, information on how to make applications and how to network; Vidcasts of employer interviews and a mock interview facility; access to University-supported international and local volunteering opportunities and Study Abroad and International Exchange programmes; opportunities to participate in the Enterprise Society or in enterprise events designed to support students thinking of starting a business or being self-employed; and an on-campus employment agency for students to gain work experience. These resources are available to all students since:

"if enterprising approaches to education are available to all University students pan-Faculty with as consistent approach as possible then issues around attainment, student diversity, and widening participation can hopefully start to be ironed out through engagement of all the students in these activities."
(Sue Smith, Director of the Institute for Enterprise, Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009)

However, offering these initiatives to all students may not actually be enough to ensure equality since, as Brown et al (2002) have pointed out, employability is not only absolute but also relative, that is “the relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment”. Data show that white, female and younger graduates are more likely to be in employment six months after graduating than black and minority ethnic (BME), male and mature graduates, while those with the highest HE entry qualifications are incrementally more likely to be in employment than those with the lowest (HESA, 2009). In addition research by Connor et al (2004) found that Indian and Chinese students were more likely to enter HE with higher qualifications, but did not do as well as might be expected in employment, while BME graduates were also found to have less chance of getting through each of the stages in the recruitment process of large organisations than white graduates.

The reasons for these differentials are complex. However, it may be that while the temporal orientation of UK policy on employability is towards the future (Clegg, 2009), not all students are able to conceptualise the opportunities available to them as contributing to their future employability. For example, recent research into students’ participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) (Stevenson & Clegg, forthcoming) shows that while some students deliberately participate in ECA to develop the knowledge, skills and experience needed to be successful in a competitive labour market in a chosen field, others most definitely do not. Some students are by force of circumstance trapped in a present orientation, unable to participate in other forms of ECA than caring responsibilities. However, there is also a large group of students, invariably those with low social and cultural capital, who are undertaking diverse ECA, but who are unable to see the value of this participation in terms of their future employment. Offering employability initiatives to all students may not, therefore, support those who need the greatest help. Those students who have a clear future focus are significantly more likely to exploit employability opportunities, thus enhancing their relative employability. Those students who are unable to orientate themselves towards the future may be unable or unwilling to utilise the opportunities presented to them, or may not recognise their inherent value.

Thomas and Jones (2007) argue that the employability of students from WP groups should be addressed in four ways: by developing explicit awareness of employability; by providing access to relevant work

experience; by improving confidence, self-esteem and aspiration with regard to applying for graduate employment; and by improving familiarity with the labour market and developing appropriate application skills. In addition, research by Omar et al (2006) into encouraging female and BME entrepreneurs highlighted the need for all-female training and support (with training for BME women focusing not only on business development and profit-making, but also on developing confidence and self-esteem); exclusive BME networking groups; targeted business start-up grants; and business support and mentoring schemes and role models. If Leeds Met is to genuinely level the playing field so that all our students are able to take advantage of the opportunities available to them, we too may need to further refine our employability strategies and undertake not just equal but positive action strategies.

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